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ABSTRACT

An exhortation was made for increased use of literature in the elementary grades: never before have books been so abundant or opportunities so available for making books easily accessible to children. The various disciplines and the changes within the last few years and their influence on new strategies for teaching literature are described. An explanation is given of two different approaches for selecting literature materials--from the standpoint of a highly structured curriculum and from that of a nonstructured curriculum. It is noted that advocates of structured or nonstructured curricula have opposing ideas as to where to place the emphasis in teaching literature. Optimism is expressed concerning the inclusion of more literature in elementary curricula i n the future. References are included. (NH)

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STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN-ELEMENTARY

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> Except a living man there is nothing more wonderful than a book! a message to us from human souls we never saw. And yet these arouse us, terrifying us, teach us, comfort us, open their hearts to us as brothers.

This gripping and perceptive statement by Charles Kingsley should inspire us to renew our efforts to introduce children to the companionship of good books.

Availability of Books Today

Never before have books been so abundant nor opportunities so lush for making books easily accessible to children. The number of new publications increases each year, to say nothing of the proliferation of paperback editions of earlier issues of hardbacks. The findings of Fader and McNeil concerning the impact of paper-bound materials on the reading habits of boys termed reluctant

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readers and reported dramatically in Hooked ~~of~~ on Books represent evidence worthy ~~for~~ of consideration. (4).

Related to the increasing number of books is the matter of improved public school library facilities, sparked by funds made available under the Elementary and Secondary School Act.

Not to be overlooked as a possible aid in motivating reading is the growing supply of audiovisual materials related to literature. Films, slides, tapes, and disc recordings are increasing in range and improving in quality.

Finally, in recent years basal reading series have devoted added space to stories and poems of literary merit. Equally noteworthy has been the emphasis which English language texts have given to literature as a springboard for the teaching of composition.

All Disciplines Take a Look at Themselves

General dissatisfaction with the results being achieved in various disciplines has led to a critical appraisal of content and method within the last ten years or so. Fortunately, this appraisal has been done jointly by scholars in the respective disciplines and by education specialists; and workable guides to improved instructional procedures have resulted.

Mathematics was the first subject matter area to make dramatic changes, with science and social studies following. More recently promising innovations have been made in the English language arts curriculum.

A core of basic principles of learning has emerged as common to all disciplines. The use of such terms as structure, relatedness, sequence, inquiry, critical thinking, and creativity is widespread; and interwoven are such names as Piaget, Bruner, Bloom, and Torrance.

Noted next will be the influence of these common concepts and their advocates on some of the new strategies for teaching literature.

What Literature Shall We Use?

For too long the teaching of literature has been neglected in the elementary school curriculum. Some teachers have spent a few minutes after lunch reading a story from an anthology or a chapter from a favorite book. The basal reader or the supplementary reader has been a more dependable source of literary material. But wherever the selection came from, it has been the rare teacher who has had a plan or purpose for teaching it. With the greater availability of materials and with more scholarly methods of teaching being advocated, the desultory handling of literature may well be on its way out.

As to the selection of literary materials, two different approaches are being discussed widely today. Those curricula which are highly structured would include literature selected according to type. A prescribed sequence would insure that at the end of the elementary school the gamut of literary genre would have been run, and children would have sampled the best of their literary heritage. Subscribing to this point of view is the Nebraska Curriculum for English (3) and the Wisconsin English Language Arts

Curriculum Project (16). Each curriculum prescribes a basic list of materials to be presented to all pupils, with a supplementary list for individual reading.

On the other hand, those advocates of a non-structured curriculum would have the needs and experiences of children dictate the literary content to be taught. In discussing this particular approach, Patrick Groff calls attention to the advantages of using tradebooks instead of basal texts or anthologies. He says, "In using tradebooks, (1) the child may have a hand in choosing what he will read; (2) the teacher may consciously select books in different genre; (3) the teacher may select books applicable to the children's way of life and interests; and (4) the teacher may refer to the latest bibliographic sources for help. If the teachers and pupils do a conscientious selection of tradebooks, they will be bound up with the individual's whole intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual life. The most effective guides the teacher can use for selecting literature for children are their individual and group life experiences, especially those out-of-school" (6:54).

In a similar vein of thought the Anglo-American Seminar on the Teaching of English, held at Dartmouth College in 1966, reported: "Literature is perhaps one of the best ways we have of coping with the tensions of identity, those problems of the 'me and the not me'; the agonies of growth are made bearable, even productive, through the vicarious enactment of them in the child who hears and reads nursery tales, fairy tales, and rhymes" (5:57).

These points of view growing out of opposing educational philosophies harken back to the period of some thirty or so years

ago when the subject-matter centered versus the child-centered curriculum was a favorite subject for debate in educational circles. Now, as then, we need to ask ourselves: Is the question one of either/or?

Dora V. Smith's answer is: "The need is for finding a happy medium between forcing specific classics upon children in common and failing to acquaint them at the proper time with those books of imagination and high literary quality which give insight into basic human values and have therefore become the common heritage of the world's children" (14:716).

Would it be possible for a group of teachers who subscribe to the child development philosophy and who are also familiar with children's literature by types to bring the two points of view together in a guide for the classroom teacher's use?

To assist adults in selecting contemporary books for children, such an outline has been developed by Charlotte S. Huck and Doris Young Kuhn. In Children's Literature in the Elementary School the authors have listed growth characteristics by grade levels, some practical implications for selecting books, and the titles of several appropriate books (8:30-36).

A conclusion at the Dartmouth conference, and reported by D. W. Harding, states that "... there is need for more exact knowledge (preferably based on longitudinal studies) about changes in the literary responses of boys and girls as they grow up" (7:16).

What Shall Be Emphasized in Teaching?

Just as we find two theories concerning criteria for the selection of literature, so we encounter opposing ideas about where to place the emphasis in teaching. According to those persons who subscribe to a structured curriculum, children should be taught some techniques of literary criticism. In fiction, among the elements explored would be plot, theme, characterization, and style. When studying poetry children would learn to identify such components as rhythm, figurative speech, means used to appeal to the senses and achieve emotional tone, and any other devices employed to secure desired effects.

These frames of reference, say those who favor the structured approach, can be used to some extent in any grade and will habituate children to a standard method of analysis and to a vocabulary that can be applied to any literary work. Jerome S. Bruner in The Process of Education refers to this type of learning and the way it functions as nonspecific transfer. "In essence, it consists of learning initially not a skill but a general idea, which can be used as a basis for recognizing subsequent problems as special cases of the idea originally mastered. This type of transfer is at the heart of the educational process--the continual broadening and deepening of knowledge in terms of basic and general ideas" (2:17).

Lest some teachers question the appropriateness of such a sophisticated approach in the elementary school, another statement by Bruner should be considered here: "... any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child

at any stage of development" (2:33). In this connection recall the superficial treatment too often afford a story: "Did you like the story? What did you like about it?" Such interrogation is neither stimulating nor intellectual.

Most of the teachers who advocate that some form of analysis be taught do not favor making literary critics of elementary school pupils. Huck and Kuhn clarify the purpose by saying, "In the elementary school, literary criticism simply means the ordered inquiry into the writing that children are reading" (8:656).

An ordered inquiry should lead to better understanding; and, says Roy Harvey Pearce, "The more one knows - knows relevantly - the richer the story or poem becomes, the more one comprehends it, the more one finds oneself comprehended by it; the more one appreciates" (11:46).

What Questions Shall We Ask?

The discovery method lends itself to the study of literature and encourages pupil involvement in the process. Huck and Kuhn recommend that after a book has been read a discussion might be started with the simple question: "What did you discover about this book?" Further questions can alert the young reader to the form and content of the story and lead him to state the plot, identify the theme, and develop an awareness of other elements used by the author to achieve his end (8:666-667). Likewise, in dealing with poetry, the teacher's questions would help children discover the devices the poet used to create mood and convey a message.

Discussions of this kind would reveal difficulties related

to literal meanings which children might have encountered. If the story or poem is one that was studied as a group assignment, then comprehension difficulties not resolved in context should be treated first.

Much like the method recommended by Huck and Kuhn but dealing somewhat more with the affective domain, Edward W. Rosenheim, Jr., suggests the consideration of two central questions: 1. "What happens in this novel or play or poem?"(and he says that this question does not mean "What is it about?") and 2. "How do you feel about what happens?" (12:57). Such questions as these, especially the latter one, encourage a creative response and help the reader relate the theme to his own life experiences.

Richard J. Smith thinks that some teachers neglect creative reading because of the time element. In his study he found that four factual or convergent questions based on one story read by third graders were answered in about sixty seconds, but one divergent or creative-type question was only beginning to elicit a response after the same length of time (15:433).

Smith found further that children responded better when they were told that their answers could go beyond the story and that they could be considered neither correct nor incorrect. Teachers, too, because of their habit of evaluating, had trouble in responding to children's answers to divergent questions without approving or disapproving (15:434).

What Is the Place of Literature in the Curriculum?

If curriculum guides are a source of dependable information, there is little agreement concerning the place of literature in the curriculum. An examination of six guides in 1968 revealed no specific concern for literature teaching. Thirteen guides, representing the period from 1965-1967, were reviewed; and "among those both specific and general treatment was reported" (10:34).

Daisy M. Jones reported in 1964 the results of her review of more than one hundred language arts curriculum guides and her analysis of forty-five of them. She said, "Prose and poetry as forms of literature are mentioned in a few of the bulletins but little attention is given to either recommended content or teaching techniques" (9:141).

The future seems somewhat brighter for the inclusion of more literature in the curriculum. Several authors of English language arts texts have followed the practice of including literary material in the pupils' texts and using it as models for composition work and in the development of skills in usage and mechanics.

No doubt many teachers make good use of appropriate literary selections when teaching some topics in social studies, science, and other subjects. One segment of pupils' understanding of Moslem countries is enriched when the teacher reads brief portions from the Korän. Robert McCloskey's Time of Wonder can enrich countless concepts in science. The charming and sensitive melodies that H. Fraser-Simson composed for some of A. A. Milne's poems, complement the poetry; and the poems, in turn, add distinction to a music lesson.

Valuable as is the contribution of literature to other subjects, it is important as a subject in its own right. As A. Sterl Artley says, "The integration of literature with the content areas should never become the justification for a literature program. Though literature heightens, enriches, and dramatizes content, that is not the reason for its teaching. . . its primary value is inherent within it. It completely justifies itself if it is enjoyed and lived, if the reader responds and reacts to a well-told story, and if he senses the rhyme and rhythm in beautiful poetry" (1:215).

Maurice Sendak, in his speech accepting the Caldecott award for Where the Wild Things Are, tells of a letter he received from a seven-year-old boy. He wrote, "How much does it cost to get to where the wild things are? If it is not expensive my sister and I want to spend the summer there. Please answer soon." Mr. Sendak said, "I did not answer that question, for I have no doubt that sooner or later they will find their way, free of charge." (13:351)

And is it not the supreme hope of all of us that we may so teach that boys and girls will want to spend time in the wonderful world of enchantment that these two children set out to find?

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